Editor's Column

Revisiting the History of Anonymous Peer Review (from Both Sides, Now)

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When I finished my doctorate and began my teaching career more than two decades ago, I wouldn't have predicted that editorial work would turn out to become so important to me. Early on I recognized that periodical print culture was central to the literary and political movements that I was interested in studying, above all the Harlem Renaissance and Négritude, and as I began to trace the intersections, correspondences, and discrepancies between those circuits of African diasporic culture, it seemed obvious to me that newspaper, journal, and anthology editors, along with translators—all the sorts of intellectuals who "nurture[d] the inconspicuous forms" of literature "that fit its influence in active communities"—were as instrumental in the making of these movements as the authors of the towering books of the tradition.[1] If diasporic consciousness—the conviction of and investment in the notion of a shared racial background and political destiny among peoples of African descent—is produced most powerfully in print, in no small degree because of the labor of these facilitators, conduits, and compilers, then editorial work is a special sort of social dance, one of the key ways that "discourse creates the social space through which it moves," and thus a means of conjuring publics through the polyvocality of periodical form.[2]

Black editors have always been highly conscious of the "public-forming dimensions" of their labor.[3] The Martinican Paulette Nardal, the first Black woman to earn a graduate degree at the Sorbonne, was devout, cultivated, and disinclined to overt political activism, but she recognized that her work as the founding editor of the short-lived *La revue du monde noir* in the early 1930s was itself a radical political intervention: as she told an interviewer years later,

"réunir tant de gens autour de moi, c'était ma façon de lutter contre le colonialisme. . . . Pourquoi ne pas rassembler les noirs du monde entier?" ("assembling so many people around me was my way of struggling against colonialism. . . . Why not gather all the Negroes in the entire world?"; Grollemund 71; my trans.; see also Edwards and Gianoncelli 28).

Part of what made editorial work seem like not only something to study but something to participate in myself was that I was struck by the degree to which so many of the great writers of the African diasporic canon have also been visionary editors: from Frederick Douglass with the *North Star*, to Pauline Hopkins with the *Colored American Magazine*, to W. E. B. Du Bois with *The Crisis* and *Phylon*, to Hubert Harrison with *The Voice* and *The Negro World*, to Richard Wright and Dorothy West with *Challenge*, to C. L. R. James with *International African Opinion*, to Aimé Césaire and Suzanne Césaire with *Tropiques*, to Ralph Ellison and Angelo Herndon with *Negro Quarterly*, to Kamau Brathwaite with *Savacou*, to Amiri Baraka with *The Cricket*, to Edouard Glissant with *Acoma*, to Nathaniel Mackey with *Hambone*.

It is still lamentably uncommon for literary scholars to analyze and appreciate the work of editors, to take stock of the time-consuming and energy-draining labor of publishing a periodical, what in 1847 the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison—perturbed by the prospect that Douglass was planning to found his own paper and pull back from his highly visible career as an antislavery lecturer—memorably described as the "cares, drudgery and perplexities of a publishing life" (qtd. in Foner 78): the daily bureaucratic grind; the scramble for funding and distribution; the prospecting for contributors; the pursuit of qualified, judicious, and constructive manuscript reviewers; the delicate prodding of authors with suggestions for revisions; the massaging of fragile if hefty contributor egos; the arrangement of various voices in the production of a new book-length collection every few months. My colleague David Scott, the founding editor of the pivotal Caribbean studies journal *Small Axe*, calls it "journal work," by which I take him to suggest not just the enabling attention and

coordinating vision of editing but moreover the full "infrastructural care" that goes into producing a periodical of any sort (Fielder and Senchyne; see also Josephs).

To call it "journal work" is a reminder, first of all, that working on a periodical has to do with a particular temporality. It is not just that the seriality of print culture represents a periodicity of intervention, an open-ended rhythm of recurrence, one issue after another, at three- or four-month intervals, characterized by a built-in time lag—a "gap between idea and event" (Tate 47)—that can seem deliberate at best and glacial at worst in the rapid-response climate of the Internet age. It is also, more bluntly, that the seemingly leisurely pace of putting out a triannual or a quarterly is in fact not at all intermittent but instead, well, *journalière*, as one says in French: an ongoing, day-to-day labor in which publishing a journal means working constantly and simultaneously on two or three issues at different stages of production (conceptualization, solicitation, review, revision, copyediting, page proofs).

At the same time, the formulation "journal work" strikes me as a way of insisting that even when they are "one-man operations"—to allude to Mackey's description of his own journal, *Hambone*, placing it in a long history of little magazines geared to counter the weight of institutional and disciplinary authority "with a valorization of individual energy, idiosyncratic vision, and centrifugal or polycentric judgment and address" (Mackey 245, 246)—still journals are always collaborative endeavors: "the collective constitution of an imagined moral-intellectual community" (Scott vii).

The most important work of an editor often takes place out of view or in the wings, too. It is a matter of the way one constructs a mise-en-scène for other voices as much as anything one might say oneself. In trying to learn how to read the periodicals I was studying, I strove to become sensitive to this sort of behind-the-scenes work, which I realized had to be understood as a specialized intellectual activity in its own right. As Antonio Gramsci wrote in the 1930s about the work of newspaper editors: "the ability of the professional intellectual

skillfully to combine induction and deduction, to generalize, to infer, to transport from one sphere to another a criterion of discrimination, adapting it to new conditions, etc. is a 'specialty'" rather than simply a matter of "common sense" (128). Nor can it be equated with scholarly production in general; obviously editing a journal is not the same thing as writing a journal article.

The specialized task of editorial practice is to maintain and even to guard jealously what Scott describes as the "internally generative source of values and preoccupations" of a journal's "project" (ix). But when he adds that the project of a journal changes over time "organically, unevenly, out of an agonistic relation between what you can make and what you have found," Scott is alluding to the art of editing (ix–x). If as he explains, "a project never knows itself in advance" and comes to recognize its parameters only in the ongoing and never-finished process of serial publication (ix), then the supple "listening" that allows the journal project to be reshaped through the "receptivity to new kinds of work, new kinds of voices" happens only in the active process of editing (x).

Scott also highlights a particular "ethos" that animates journal work: "a reflexive spirit of intellectual *receptivity* and *generosity*" that characterizes the sensibility of the best editors (vii). He writes: "What journal work entails, above all, is less the ability to identify excellence, as such, than the cultivation of a capacity for attunement to the work of others, and a responsive ability to shelter and enable perspectives on common and uncommon themes that do not necessarily align with, indeed, that sometimes willfully diverge from, one's own" (vii). The term "journal work" is perhaps too vague and generic to capture the subtlety of an editorial ethos in this sense, which requires a constantly recalibrated mix of something like obstinacy (in one's commitment to the "source" of the journal's project) on the one hand, and humility on the other. For the editor's task is to manage the self-definition of that source, which happens only through its contact with an outside, with the unfamiliar and the new. In other words, the project is disclosed only through the "conversation" that is serially

and formally constellated in the interplay and discrepance among the multiple individual texts published in the journal—a conversation that must come to suggest its own center of gravity, as it were, while remaining open to the entrance of new voices that inevitably shift that center.

If receptivity is clearly a matter of the ways the editor or editorial board accommodates unsolicited manuscript submissions, it is also a matter of assemblage: the ways editing involves the active shaping of that conversation through the journal's carefully curated "disposition of space," the deliberate order and arrangement of the contents to suggest certain kinds of juxtaposition or convergence.[4] One might say that the art of editing is thus also an art of *orchestration*. And of course—in a manner that feels increasingly ironic or even anachronistic in an age when the predominant mode of reading journals has become downloading PDFs of single articles found by keyword searches on databases—the editor's unit of composition (the scale on which that conversation is formalized) is inherently the individual issue.

What drew me in? What tempted me, an untenured assistant professor, when my colleagues on the *Social Text* collective asked me to consider serving as coeditor? I had an instinctive inclination toward the "collective dimension" of scholarship (Alonso, "Editor's Column" [2003] 1235): first a hunch, then a leap, then a habit (ingrained in muscle memory), then a conviction of the social foundation of any and all intellectual work, and a deep aversion to the myth of monadic authorship. It was a matter of sensibility, too, I'm sure, rooted in what might be called a predilection for the backstage arts. Not quiescence, not timidity, but an attraction to a sort of voluble reticence—an inclination to speak through the cultivation and arrangement of other voices.[5] Through what the musician Butch Morris would call "conduction," in other words: the delicate and volatile work of intuiting, guiding, and being guided by the "motive power" of an ensemble, in an open-ended convening or forum (Douglass, *Life and Times* 327).[6]

I suspect that my own editorial trajectory is unique in that I have gone from serving for a decade

as the coeditor of *Social Text*, a journal run by a multidisciplinary editorial collective, to my current position as the editor of *PMLA*, the august flagship journal of the main professional organization devoted to the study of language and literature in the United States. Like some of its peers in the cohort of scholarly journals founded in the 1970s (including *October*, *Diacritics*, *New German Critique*, *Critical Inquiry*, *Radical History Review*, and *Feminist Studies*), *Social Text* deliberately adopted a collective editorial structure in which decisions about submissions and issue contents would be decided by an affiliated group of scholars from different fields who shared an ongoing political commitment to a particular, if shifting, approach to the analysis of culture and society. The collective's open, shared, sometimes contentious editorial work was, and remains, rooted in an explicit rejection of the epistemological presuppositions of traditional disciplinary "blind" peer review. (The two coeditors are responsible for leading the editorial collective, but they do not serve as editors in chief in a hierarchical decision-making structure.) *PMLA*, in contrast, maintains a rigorous standard of so-called double-blind peer review, in which the identity of authors submitting work for publication is concealed from peer reviewers and from the editor and editorial board throughout the course of the review process.[7]

Before I started my tenure as *PMLA* editor, I assumed that the hostility to anonymous peer review among many of the journals associated with critical theory, cultural studies, and feminism that emerged in the 1970s was a rejection of the long-standing, deeply entrenched protocols of disciplinary gatekeeping in the US academy. It was only when I began to read deeply in the history of *PMLA* that I came to realize that the history of peer review was more complicated than I thought.

In the mid-1990s, my predecessor Domna Stanton used a number of her editor's columns to revisit debates and lingering misconceptions around the adoption of double-blind peer review in *PMLA*. As she points out, in the 1970s author-anonymous peer review was quite uncommon among academic journals in the humanities. An

ACLS survey of professional societies in 1977 found that its use was much more widespread in the social sciences, having been adopted as policy by professional organizations in fields including economics, political science, psychology, sociology, and anthropology (Stanton, "What's in a Name?" 68; Herbert 5).

In the MLA, the push for the adoption of author-anonymous peer review was initiated in the mid-1970s by the Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession, whose members were disturbed by anecdotal evidence that female scholars had difficulty successfully placing their work at the most prominent journals in the field. In 1974, a cognate group in the American Philological Association (APA), noting that "although the discipline had always had a considerable number of tenured women, disproportionately few were reading papers at the annual meetings," called for an experiment: the APA would select program participants at its annual convention through anonymous review. The results were dramatic: within two years, the percentage of papers written by women that were accepted for presentation nearly tripled (from 6.7% to 19.5%) (Stanton, "What's in a Name?" 73). Inspired by this evidence, Stanton and other members of the Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession raised the issue in the MLA, focusing on the association's journal. "The results of the APA experiment were my first contact with the incredible dimensions of the problem," Stanton later explained. "I pushed, using the Commission on the Status of Women as a catalyst, for *PMLA* to adopt such a policy, but there was enormous resistance—mostly from the editors, who were senior men. It took a lot of lobbying on our part" (qtd. in Herbert 4).

Responding to this pressure, in October 1976 the MLA Executive Council assigned William D. Schaefer, the executive director of the association as well as the editor of *PMLA*, to undertake a "comprehensive study" of author-anonymous peer review in other scholarly journals (Schaefer, "Anonymous Review" 4). In addition to his thirty-nine-page report, which Schaefer presented to the council in October 1977, *PMLA* staff

members also surveyed the more than two thousand articles that had been submitted to the journal since March 1973.[8] A four-part series titled "*PMLA* Profile" was published in the *MLA Newsletter*, compiling a statistical breakdown of submissions by subfield as well as the ranks, institutional homes, and genders of the authors. And the Executive Council agreed to put the topic of anonymous peer review on the agenda for discussion at the MLA Delegate Assembly in December 1977.

Schaefer summarized the statistical findings in a long article in the summer 1978 *MLA Newsletter* on the pros and cons of anonymous peer review ("Anonymous Review"). The article includes quotations from letters by faculty members around the country, which indicate the deep disagreement in the profession about the potential policy change; more letters were published in the following issue as well under the title "Anonymous Review: The Debate Continues." Although the breakdown suggested that female scholars at every rank in the profession met lower acceptance rates than their male counterparts, Schaefer found that the evidence was ultimately ambiguous: the figures "tell us a good deal about patterns within our profession," he wrote, "but the situations those patterns describe are so complex that anyone who believes that bias does or does not exist can find 'evidence' to support a particular viewpoint" ("Anonymous Review" 4).[9] In fact, Schaefer admitted, "the issue is . . . one on which I have strong personal feelings." In his seven years as *PMLA* editor, after having read "some six thousand reports on nearly three thousand articles," Schaefer wrote, "I have come to respect—indeed, to cherish—the openness of our present system," in which the names, rank, and institutional affiliation of authors were not concealed from peer reviewers during the editorial process (5). Some opposed to anonymous review argued that "a reader cannot write a truly helpful report unless the identity of the author is known and the reader has some idea of the author's background," Schaefer reported, and others contended that "humanistic study, which unlike the sciences attempts not to 'prove' but rather to illuminate

and to explain, involves and demands an open community of scholars" (5). Schaefer continued:

> I believe *PMLA*'s current procedures have helped create a vital community of scholars and have thereby strengthened our Association and our profession. To me, anonymous review would be like asking us all to wear masks and to disguise our voices when we speak at meetings at the MLA Convention, thereby "ensuring" that colleagues would not be biased against our views because of who or what we are or are not. If we have come to that, what a sad commentary on our profession and the state of humanistic endeavor.   (5–6)

A few years later, when Stanton penned her own reflection on the way the policy change had come about, she included a withering dismissal of Schaefer's strained mask metaphor, and minced no words in diagnosing what she considered to be the real roots of his high-minded resistance:

> [W]e may conjecture . . . that behind the intense resistance of senior literary scholars and editors, who are almost all white males, lies a fear of exclusion, of being denied the relatively easy access to one another's journals that they now possess, of being reduced to the level of unknown assistant professors and subjected to the same scrutiny. Author-anonymous reviewing may well pose the threat of losing one of the few perquisites and privileges that a senior professor of literature enjoys in our society. A symbolic castration, it evokes the possibility of being robbed of a powerful weapon that senior scholars secretly believe is rightfully theirs.
> ("What's in a Name?" 69)

In May 1978, the Executive Council called for a formal vote on the question of author-anonymous review at the Delegate Assembly at the December convention (Stanton, "What's in a Name?" 77). The change was approved overwhelmingly, approved by the council in May 1979, and finally implemented in January 1980, initially for a three-year trial period and then as a permanent procedural change ("New Policy"; Stanton, "Editor's Column" [1996] 201).

Since then, *PMLA* has operated with a strict policy of anonymous peer review for every submitted article, according to which "the author's name is not made known to consultant readers, to members of the Advisory Committee and the Editorial Board, or to the editor" until a final decision is reached whether to accept or decline the submission (Stanton, "Editor's Column" [1997] 191). Although the impetus for the transformation was a feminist concern around potential bias against women authors, Stanton argued in 1982 that

> author-anonymous reviewing can do more than combat prejudice against femaleness (as denoted by a name). It can protect those whose names are unknown from discrimination that favors the well-known; it can also eliminate unconscious bias against those who are unemployed or employed at black, community, or women's colleges, which are deemed unprestigious in comparison to research universities with national reputations. In a word, then, author-anonymous reviewing may provide the relatively powerless in the academy with more equal access to the means of scholarly production and thus a chance not only to improve their professional status but also, in these desperate times, to survive in the academy. ("What's in a Name?" 69–70)

In other words, author-anonymous peer review developed as a political critique of the standards of review in the humanities: the change in policy was "founded on the incontestable premise that the decisions determining who speaks and who remains silent in institutional and professional contexts involve a dialectic of power and thus the ideology of the culture" (74). Looking back at the effects of the change from a more recent vantage point, Michael Bérubé has gone so far as to say that "peer review itself constitutes the real revolution in scholarly communication, the one that gave scholars autonomous intellectual authority over the means of production in their fields" (135).

What I realized when I revisited the history of this major shift was that the founding of *Social Text* and its cohort of influential 1970s journals of critical theory, cultural studies, and feminist theory was concurrent to this debate within the MLA, and

even emerged from the same climate of critique within the association.[10] Fredric Jameson, who founded *Social Text* in 1979 with another scholar of comparative literature, John Brenkman, and the sociologist Stanley Aronowitz, recalls that their initial meetings came about through the work of the Marxist Literary Group (MLG), an affiliated group of the MLA that was organized in 1969 and 1970 to foster the discussion of issues at the intersection of Marxist literary criticism and political theory (Edwards and McCarthy 3). Jameson invited Aronowitz to take part in the plenary session "Toward a Marxist Theory of Culture," organized by the MLG at the 1976 MLA convention in San Francisco. Their conversations quickly turned to the idea of founding a journal in order to "re-examine the salience of Marxist theory for cultural, political, and social thought" (Aronowitz qtd. in Edwards and McCarthy 4). They were struck by what they took to be a consensus on the intellectual Left at the time that the key venue of political mobilization was no longer the political party. "So we thought," as Jameson later remembered, "if we're trying to build up a Marxist intellectual movement in this country, we would have to have a journal" (qtd. in Edwards and McCarthy 4). At the December 1977 MLA convention in Chicago—the very same convention where anonymous peer-review was on the agenda for discussion at the Delegate Assembly—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak hosted a reception where the founding of *Social Text* was announced.

The four-page prospectus that Jameson, Brenkman, and Aronowitz wrote for the first issue makes it clear that the new journal would take up a set of concerns that went beyond the arena of literary studies. *Social Text* was subtitled "Theory, Culture, Ideology," and the editorial statement sketched a bracing array of rubrics the journal intended to cover, including a number of topics ("Everyday Life and Revolutionary Praxis"; "Symbolic Investments of the Political"; "The Texts of History"; "Marxism and the State"; "'Consumer Society' and the World System") that went beyond the purview of literature as a delimited focus of study. This is not to say that the journal

abandoned the literary altogether; but in founding *Social Text*, Aronowitz, Brenkman, and Jameson took up what they considered to be the legacy of the "little magazine," especially the great modernist periodicals of the early twentieth century that were explicitly cast as the "sponsors of innovation, the gathering places for the 'irreconcilables'" of literature and political critique (Hoffman et al. v). In other words, the undertaking would be what Perry Anderson calls a "tightrope affair," striving to maintain "a balance between such disparate fields as the economic and the aesthetic, the sociological and the philosophical . . . under the primacy of the political" (22). Although *Social Text* quickly came to consider unsolicited submissions, initially this orientation also meant a focus on commissioned work. As Aronowitz put it, this curatorial approach to editing the early issues helped give them "a certain bite, and a certain character": a recognizable "profile" (Aronowitz et al. 169). Literature remained central, but it was set editorially into new constellations of inquiry, as demonstrated by the juxtaposition between the first two articles in the first issue: Edward Said's devastating "Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims" (one of the key sections of his book *The Question of Palestine*) and Bruce Boone's groundbreaking work on queer poetics, "Gay Language as Political Praxis: The Poetry of Frank O'Hara."

There is much more to say, of course, about the political and procedural implications of the differences in editorial structure between these two models. There is a stark contrast between the "infrastructure art" (Dimock 10) of editorial review in the journal of a sprawling professional association and the hardscrabble tactics of a periodical run by a small self-selected group of colleagues that was deliberately established in the lineage of what Ezra Pound long ago evocatively called the "impractical or fugitive magazine" (702), initially relying for its production costs on contributions from members of the collective, meager subscription sales, and small state grants. In the years before the journal was granted an editorial office at Rutgers University in 1991 and then signed a publication contract with Duke University Press in 1992, the

hard road of institutional independence and the eschewal of a grounding in disciplinarity had consequences for the functioning of *Social Text* at every level, from the journal's DIY approach to copyediting, desktop publishing, and envelope licking to the occasionally scattered review process itself. One former coeditor, Toby Miller, recalls that a friend once received a rejection letter from *Social Text*

> that apologized for taking a long time to come to a decision, explaining that the manuscript had been lost when it fell from the back of someone's motorbike and this was ultimately assumed to be some kind of sign. He loved this letter. It was his favorite rejection of any kind, from anywhere. We became a bit more organized, which was probably a good thing.   (Aronowitz et al. 170)

Although the editorship of *PMLA* is a "democratic and collaborative enterprise" rather than "the solo performance of an imperial authority, someone like the legendary 'Mr. Shawn,' whose word at the *New Yorker* was reputedly the beginning and the end" (Stanton, "Editor's Column" [1993] 9), it is nonetheless a different galaxy from an editorial collective where submissions are discussed openly and voted on by the entire group. In the *Social Text* model, what is shared among members of the collective is not disciplinary affiliation but instead a commitment to what the founding editors called "the Marxist framework" (Jameson et al. 3), understood as a "tendency" rather than a "programme": an open-ended set of problematics and a commitment to dialectical thought and historical perspective rather than a dogma.[11]

One way to summarize the difference would be to say that in the *PMLA* model, the discipline itself is what is continually put into question and renegotiated. As another former *PMLA* editor, Carlos Alonso, once observed, the "preoccupation with what constitutes the qualities of a successful *PMLA* article is in fact never settled in the mind of a board member" (qtd. in Stanton, "Editor's Column" [1995] 194). On the contrary, this question is what animates the entire multistage review

process, which at its best functions as a sort of "ideal seminar" that is catalyzed and recast by each and every submission (Showalter 4). In the *Social Text* model, however, it is the collective itself that becomes the arena and product of a shifting negotiation of the standards and parameters of inquiry into society and culture in the broadest sense. The editorial collective

> foments a deliberative process that aims to set its own context and hence to make something generative of its internal disciplinary difference. . . . The mix of disciplinary backgrounds at the editorial table creates pressure for each contribution to achieve a kind of internal translation: to consider readers beyond its own formative circuits; to assemble literatures, criticisms, and interests from outside its initial conditions. In this regard, the editorial collective enacts a kind of mediating force—not only among potential publics, but also between its own immediate context of encounter and its subsequent applications. This mediating force lives on through published work even beyond the immediate context of the journal, in the ways that essays resonate laterally, beyond their initial topics and fields.
>
> (Edwards et al. 76)

As divergent as they may seem, the two models might be said to share a certain romanticism, based in an investment in a process geared to evaluate a loosely defined but supposedly universal standard of "intrinsic merit" (Schaefer, "Anonymous Review" 4) or "intellectual merit" (Stanton, "Editor's Column" [1997] 192) in a manner that risks ignoring the ways that "personal affinity and intellectual charisma come to play a crucial role in any group dialogue" and overlooking the ways that "disciplinary expertise can come in through the back door, as it were, giving authority to advocacy or critique at certain moments in the process of deliberation" (Edwards et al. 76). In a 1988 *PMLA* guest column, Stanley Fish argues forcefully that the very notion of a disinterested consideration of intrinsic merit is ludicrous. For Fish, the intrinsic is "a political rather than an essential category" (745), produced by internal debates within the profession in a manner that could not be extricated from

precisely the "extraneous considerations" that anonymous peer review was designed to eliminate (739), including "considerations of rank, professional status, previous achievement, ideology, and so on" (744).

But this critique would have to apply across the board—as Fish writes, "the pure case of a reading without bias is never available" (746)—in a way that would shape the dynamics of the review process in the editorial collective model as much as in the anonymous peer review model. What bothers Fish is his sense that some advocates of "blind submission" justified that policy change as a matter of equity: as a means of supposedly "doing away with politics" (745). But reviewing the intertwined history of these shifts in academic publishing in the late 1970s is a reminder that in fact both anonymous peer review and collective editorial models emerged as what Fish calls "frankly political arguments" (745).

Revisiting the history of peer review from both sides, now, I am struck by the degree to which the founding of journals such as *Social Text* and the implementation of author-anonymous peer review at *PMLA* were parallel political interventions aimed at disciplinarity from different angles: one a feminist irruption from within the discipline itself, the other a challenge to the "strategic containment or delimitation" of academic disciplines from the outside (Jameson et al. 3).

Although I appreciate the ways that, as a rhetorical strategy, the critique of disciplinarity as "strategic containment" can make space for the unfettered methodological innovation of a collective editorial process, my experience at *PMLA* over the past few years has made me less convinced that the journal serves to police or "delimit" the scope of inquiry in the scholarship it publishes. In a 2009 essay about the function of the editorial collective, my *Social Text* coeditors Randy Martin and Anna McCarthy and I wrote that "peer review might once have served the purpose of ensuring professional autonomy, but the politics of late-twentieth-century disciplinarity demanded that the peer-review editorial system trade blindness for oversight" (Edwards et al. 75). I remember

being tickled when Randy came up with that clever riff on Paul de Man, but now, it feels unjustified and facile, at least as a description of the *PMLA* process. I find it impossible to describe the intense, conscientious, pragmatic discussions at editorial board meetings as producing anything approaching disciplinary "oversight." As my predecessor Marianne Hirsch once wrote about her own experience as editor,

> contrary to a common misconception voiced to me recently by a colleague, I have also not found that we decline work that is innovative, risk-taking, or controversial in favor of the safer essays on which we concur. And although board members may apply quite divergent standards to the essays before them, reflecting disciplinary preferences and prejudices, in addition to personal ones, I have not by and large found that those differences have caused the final decisions to favor some fields over others. (323)

In my experience, a significant portion of the discussion at editorial board meetings is devoted to the cross-disciplinary implications of the submission at hand: the ways that almost all *PMLA* essays go beyond the scope of the merely literary, incorporating methodologies derived from fields as various as philosophy, linguistics, legal history, economics, gender and sexuality studies, sound studies, digital humanities, environmental science, media studies, colonial history, art history, and ethnography. If receptivity means anything in journal work, it means an openness to the ways that literary study is constantly being "splintered"[12] and reconfigured into different modes of inquiry in each and every article, and in the virtual symposium they represent when read in conjunction. Whatever the editorial model, the ultimate responsibility of peer review is to learn to listen for these changes.

Notes

1. The quotation is drawn from the passage evoking the "prompt language" of ephemeral print culture in Walter Benjamin's *One-Way Street* that I discuss in the prologue of my book *The Practice of Diaspora* (8–9).

2. The observation about the ways discourse creatives social space is Michael Warner's (James et al. 244–45). See also Edwards, "Editing."

3. The phrase "public-forming dimensions" is adopted from Warner's comments about the impact of David Walker's *Appeal* (James et al. 256).

4. The phrase "disposition of space" is adopted from Richard Terdiman's work on the newspaper. As opposed to the critical journal, in which the disposition of space might be said to convey an analytical problematic and even a political horizon allegorically through a "conversation" suggested in the ordering and arrangement of its contents, "the newspaper is built by addition of discrete, theoretically disconnected elements which juxtapose themselves only in response to the abstract requirements of 'layout'—thus of a disposition of space whose logic, ultimately, is commercial" (Terdiman 122).

5. In this sense my commitment to editorial work is not unrelated to my commitment to translation. Recently it occurred to me that this sensibility is equally on display in the book I wrote with the composer Henry Threadgill, a similar "combination of modesty and ambition: a decision as a writer to put oneself at the service of another person's voice, but also and at the same time the audacity to shape that voice" (Shoemaker).

6. Even as Douglass emphasized the ways that becoming an editor was instrumental in his political education and his development as a writer, he also recognized that the status of the profession afforded a certain earned anonymity, a retreat from the singularity of the speaking self—the privilege of receding into the woodwork, as it were. In the 26 June 1851 issue of *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, he noted that since its founding three years earlier he had habitually signed his editorials with the initials "F. D." to establish the fact of his authorship, given that "it had been repeatedly denied that an uneducated fugitive slave could write the English language with such propriety and correctness" ("F. D."). But he had reached a point where he felt he could publish his editorials unsigned. By now, Douglass wrote, "we hope we have removed all doubts which our signature can possibly remove in this line. We shall now, therefore, dispense with them, and assume fully the right and dignity of an Editor—a Mr. Editor if you please!"

7. A number of former *PMLA* editors have devoted columns to explaining the mechanics of the review process. See Alonso, "Editor's Column" [2001]; Schaefer, "Editor's Column" [Mar. 1975]; Showalter.

8. The survey focused on submissions since March 1973 because the journal's editorial policy had been revised at that point. As Schaefer explained in his January 1975 column—which in fact was the very first "Editor's Column" ever published in the journal—"while continuing 'to present distinguished contemporary scholarship and criticism' as it has been doing with greater or lesser success for the past eighty-nine years, *PMLA* will now endeavor to publish only articles that are 'of significant interest to the entire membership of the Association'" (3). Three years later, in his final column as editor, Schaefer admitted that the ideal of publishing articles "of significant interest to the entire membership" had proved "elusive" ("Editor's Column"

[Oct. 1978] 859). His successor, Joel Conarroe, announced in the October 1980 issue that the editorial policy would be revised; the January 1981 issue introduced the call for submissions that remains in the front matter of *PMLA*: "As the publication of a large and heterogeneous association, the journal is receptive to a variety of topics, whether general or specific, and to all scholarly methods and theoretical perspectives. The ideal *PMLA* essay exemplifies the best of its kind, whatever the kind; addresses a significant problem; draws out clearly the implications of its findings; and engages the attention of its audience through a concise, readable presentation." Schaefer's thirty-nine-page 1977 report for the Executive Council does not appear to have been made available to the MLA membership.

9. For example, Schaefer noted, "articles on Shakespeare have a 4.6% acceptance rate, whereas those on the British Romantics have a 10.5% rate, suggesting that *PMLA*'s editorial policy may favor one kind of article over the other. Since the *PMLA* Editorial Board has accepted 50% of all articles recommended to it in both of these fields, the discrepancy results from the fact that Shakespeare specialists have themselves recommended only 9.3% of all articles on Shakespeare while Romanticists have recommended 21% of the articles currently being submitted in their field. Does this mean that Shakespeare scholars have a bias against articles written about Shakespeare, or does it mean that it is more difficult to write an article 'of significant interest to the entire membership' if the subject is Shakespeare rather than the Romantics?" ("Anonymous Review" 4). Likewise, Schaefer pointed out, "[s]ince articles written by female full professors have a lower acceptance rate (4.4%) than male full professors (11.1%), one might assume prejudice against female authors, but then one might also deduce prejudice against male authors by noting that the acceptance rate for females without rank or institutional affiliation is higher (7.1%) than that for males in similar categories (2.5%)" (4). He did not note how many submissions came from authors "without rank or institutional affiliation," however; and the statistics are unambiguous that the overall acceptance rate for male authors was higher than that for female authors ("*PMLA* Profile—4").

10. For a more detailed investigation of the history of the founding of *Social Text*, see Edwards and McCarthy 2–8.

11. T. S. Eliot draws a distinction between an editorial "programme," which for him is inherently precarious to maintain ("the more dogmatic the more fragile"), on the one hand, and a "tendency" continually renegotiated through an ongoing "adjustment between editor, collaborators and occasional contributors," on the other (3).

12. I am thinking here of Barbara Herrnstein Smith's 1988 Presidential Address, in which Smith makes a compelling case that "fields 'splinter' at various points in their development for more or less the same reasons that they become specialized—and that's not a problem either. (The splinters of a field of knowledge once called moral philosophy now make up much of what we call the social sciences: anthropology, economics, psychology, etc., and their splinters and new combinations—social psychology, economic anthropology, and so forth.) Splintering and assembling in new ways is the nature of the development of knowledge. Indeed, one measure of the fertility of contemporary literary studies is the extent of the field's effects on other disciplines: that is, the appropriation of its theories and methods in fields ranging from history and anthropology to religious studies and law, and the consequent emergence of new intellectual connections and clusterings" (290).

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